

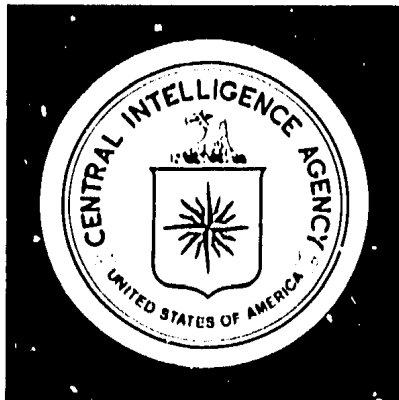
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Developments in Indochina

State Dept. review
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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA*(Information as of 1800)*Page

SOUTH VIETNAM

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The Communists have not renewed their pressure against Tonle Cham, but the situation remains critical. Government and Communist delegates have agreed upon setting up the Two-Party Joint Military Commission in Saigon, but the question of the deployment of teams to the countryside remains unsolved.

LAOS

3

The military situation remains calm.

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The Communists have given "new instructions" to one of their negotiators, while another has provided an insight on what they hope to achieve in the new National Political Council.

CAMBODIA

5

Prince Sihanouk has reaffirmed his stand on the war during a broadcast datelined Shanghai. A Republican Party official claims to have been the target of an assassination attempt. The government has begun clearing a road south of Phnom Penh while Khmer insurgents remain active in several areas. The government claims to have rebuffed Khmer insurgent offers to negotiate.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

The Communists thus far have not renewed their pressure against the Tonle Cham ranger camp, following the three-hour truce on 24 March. The situation at the camp remains critical, however, and it is believed to be untenable. A heavy Communist barrage prior to the truce leveled what was left of the camp, and supplies for its 200 defenders have been depleted. Casualties of both sides were evacuated during the truce under the supervision of the ICCS and military truce team members, who subsequently left Tonle Cham despite government appeals to stay on.

There are reports that the South Vietnamese Military Region 3 commander, General Minh, is determined not to lose the camp and may try a relief operation with one or two army regiments. Viet Cong radiobroadcasts indicate that the Communists consider the area around Tonle Cham to be part of their territory, however, and are prepared to vie with Saigon for its control.

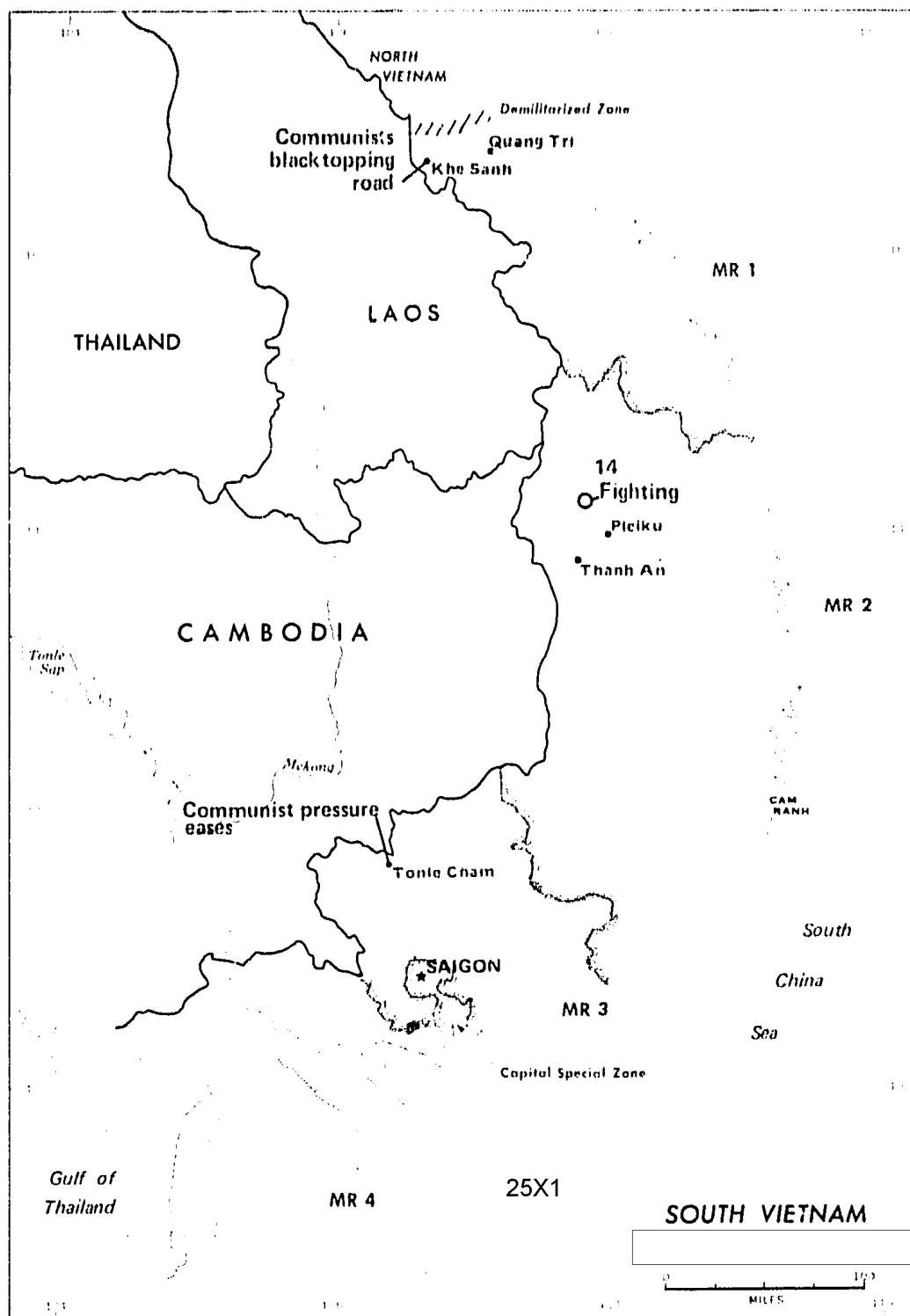
There was some sharp fighting in the highlands as South Vietnamese regulars continued clearing efforts west of Route 14 in the Kontum-Pleiku provincial border area. Ranger units have been given an ambitious task of clearing a large section of western Pleiku Province lying north of Thanh An District capital. The government apparently is not going to try to retake several positions closer to the border that were lost earlier this year, however.

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[REDACTED]

photography of the Khe Sanh area reveals that the Communists are blacktopping sections of a road near the airfield, probably to make it useable during the upcoming wet season. [REDACTED]

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Two-Party Joint Military Commission

Representatives of the Thieu government and the Viet Cong have ironed out some of their differences over setting up the Two-Party Joint Military Commission (TPJMC), which is to be inaugurated on 29 March. The two sides have agreed that the total strength of each party's delegation will be between 1,200 and 1,500. Still unresolved is the question of how TPJMC teams will be deployed outside of Saigon. [REDACTED]

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LAOSMilitary Situation

There were no major cease-fire violations over the weekend. In the southern panhandle minor skirmishes continue northeast of Khong Sedone and southeast of Thakhek, where government troops have launched a clearing operation. [REDACTED]

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Souvanna on Negotiations

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According to a Pathet Lao radiobroadcast, Communist negotiator Phoune Sipraseuth has received "new instructions" from the Pathet Lao Central Committee in Sam Neua. The earliest that Phoune could return to Vientiane to resume talks with the government would be 27 March, when the ICC flight arrives from Hanoi. [REDACTED]

More on Communist Negotiation Strategy

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Communist negotiator Souk Vongsak provided new insight on what the Pathet Lao hope to achieve by the creation of a Joint National Political Council during talks with the government on 21 March. Souk insisted that the council must exist on an equal footing with a new coalition government and that both should be formed at the same time. Moreover, the council, according to Souk, should have subcommittees corresponding to key governmental functions such as defense and foreign affairs.

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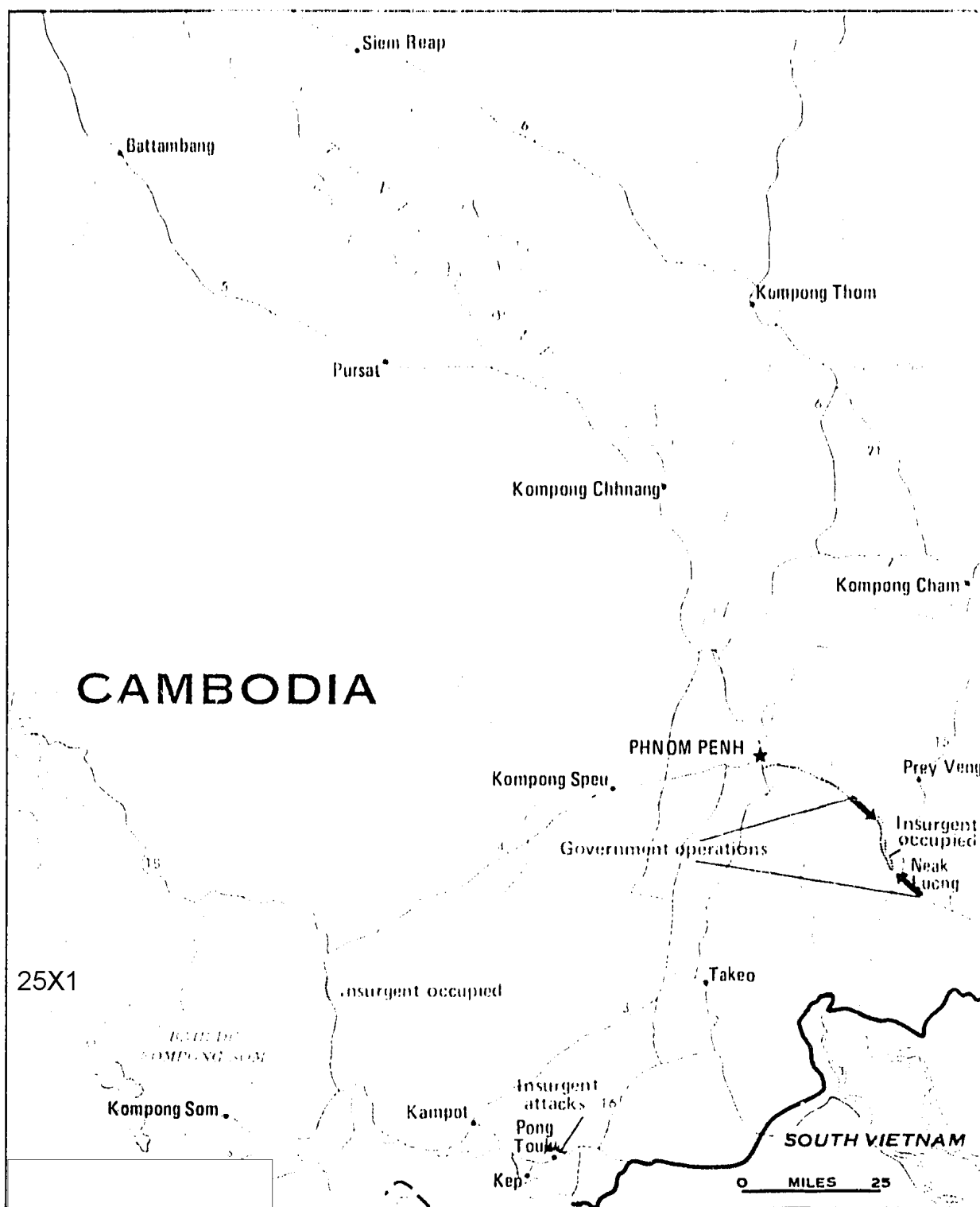
While these demands are subject to further negotiation, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Pathet Lao envision the council as a political fallback position should they be unable to dominate a coalition government headed by Souvanna. The Communists will probably try to undermine the authority of the coalition government, dominating those council subcommittees that correspond to cabinet positions not under their control. Thus, the Pathet Lao, since they claim the council to be of equal status with the government, may hope to hamstring any government decision not to their liking by turning to the council for a veto.

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CAMBODIA

In another in his series of messages to the Cambodian people, Prince Sihanouk on 23 March reaffirmed his stand that the war in Cambodia will continue as long as Washington refuses to talk or negotiate directly with his "government" and continues its "violations" of that article of the Paris agreement that pertains to Cambodia. The message also reiterated that any negotiations with the present government in Phnom Penh were impossible.

The dateline of the message--Shanghai--seems designed to give the impression that Sihanouk is still in that city. Sihanouk has not been seen in public since his departure on 16 February from Hainan Island "for Shanghai." His long seclusion has led to considerable speculation about his whereabouts. Perhaps the most popular theory is that he is visiting a "liberated" area of Cambodia. Early this year, Sihanouk said that he hoped to make such a visit before he travels to various East European and African capitals in May or June. There has been some evidence, however, that the Khmer insurgents were opposed to receiving their nominal leader. In any case, when Sihanouk does resurface he is likely to have some significant pronouncements to make.

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Political Assassination Attempt

A prominent official of Sirik Matak's Republican Party has told US Embassy officials that two Honda riders tossed a grenade into his jeep on 24 March. Although he was able to throw the grenade into the street before it exploded, the official was wounded slightly. He attributed the incident to Brigadier General Lon Non, with whom he broke politically in early 1972.

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[REDACTED]

Matak, meanwhile, remains under "protective custody" at his home. His recent published interview with a US correspondent, in which he stated that Sihanouk would defeat Lon Nol in a free election, will not hasten his release. [REDACTED]

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The Military Situation

Government forces on 24 March began a multi-battalion operation to clear a 15-mile section of Route 1 between Phnom Penh and Neak Luong. Four government battalions are attempting to push south along the highway, while other units are trying to move up Route 1 from the Neak Luong ferry crossing. At last report, they had made no progress. Meanwhile, the insurgents continue to harass and probe government positions along the Mekong north of Neak Luong.

Elsewhere, the insurgents on 25 March attacked government positions along Route 4 some 50 miles north of the port of Kompong Som, temporarily closing a six-mile section of the highway at that point. The insurgents are also keeping up their attacks on government positions at Pong Touk in the extreme southeastern part of the country. Three government outposts near that small town have been overrun since 23 March. [REDACTED]

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Another Negative Note on Negotiations

A government spokesman has told the press that the Khmer insurgents have offered to begin negotiations with the Lon Nol government on a peace settlement, but that the government has turned down the Communist proposals because several conditions were found unacceptable. According to the spokesman, the offer was contained in a letter to First Minister Hang Thun Hak and purportedly was written by Sihanouk's in-country "minister of interior" Hou Youn. The spokesman refused to divulge the proposals.

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[REDACTED]

other than one stipulation that President Lon Nol and his supporters were not to take part in the negotiations.

Hak first revealed that he had been in contact with Hou Youn in a conversation with US Ambassador Swank late last month. The fragmentary nature of Hak's accounts of his contacts with Hou Youn and the uncertainty as to whether Youn is even alive throw considerable doubt on whether the proposals are authentic. Even if they are authentic, however, by divulging them to the press Hak probably has effectively closed off this channel to the insurgents.

[REDACTED]

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